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Character Education: A Resurgence to Safety, A Perspective in Curricula Trend

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April 1999. Eighteen dead, many more wounded, all shot by their fellow students. Who can forget the tragedy of Columbine High School? Sadly, Columbine was not the first, or last, incident of a school shooting carried out by students. In a five year period there were twenty-eight incidents nationwide, of students shooting other students. The incidents ranged from a bereft boyfriend, to a premeditated attack on fellow classmates, as the fire alarm was pulled, students were shot as they evacuated the building.

The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) conducted a survey of each incident. The FBI wanted to develop a profile of a school shooter. The profile they developed showed that the shooter would be a male (or female), who was white (or black), a young teen (or older teen), who found school difficult (or was in honors classes), came from a broken home (or a good family) and who lived in a rural area (or city). The FBI found no common thread to the shootings, save one. Every shooter had been a victim of teasing and bullying.

The cry went out, much like Paul Revere's call to the Minutemen, for schools to put an end to harassment and bullying at school. "But, isn't teasing and bullying, just part of being a kid? One day you're the dog, the next day you're the tree?" Thus reasons the parents of those children disciplined for such behavior. Schools are asked to form a counter-culture. How do you do that? Can this lesson only be learned through discipline, or can we develop a curriculum through which children learn respect, communication skills, conflict resolution, care, service, acceptance and tolerance?

Character Education is such curricula. There are many and various programs which are called character education, and the system of delivery varies by location. Students at Hyde Elementary School, in Washington, D.C.

"Pledge every morning to 'play with everyone' and to 'treat other kids like I want to be treated.' And when students finish sharing a bit of personal news in front of the class, they pause and announce, 'I'm ready for questions and comments now.'" (Viadero, 2003)

Hyde Elementary School is implementing The Responsive Classroom, one of 15-20 character education programs that have a strong research basis, according to Marvin Berkowitz (Viadero, 2003).

Marvin Berkowitz is a professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and works with the Washington-based, Character Education Partnership. The Partnership examines different character education programs. Through his work with the Partnership, Berkowitz has been amazed at the number of different character education programs in use, over 300. He estimates only 15-20 have a strong research basis. (Viadero, 2003) More programs are likely to be developed.

Berkowitz and others expect more programs to be developed for two main reasons. First, the U. S. Department of Education is calling for more effective programs, and is subsidizing the research. Second, educators themselves are calling for effective, research backed, programs. However, even though educators agree on the need for the program, they are undecided as to how or to whom the

program should be taught. Educators generally believe that an effective program prevents violence, drug abuse and teen pregnancy. (Viadero, 2003)

Cletus Bulach conducted research with educators, parents and clergy to rank the most important traits that needs to be incorporated in a character education program. Educators said that respect for self, others and property was the top trait, followed by honesty and self-control. Clergy ranked as top the traits of perseverance, motivation and empathy. Bulach is also quick to point out that the priorities of one community may be different than the priorities of another community. (Bulach, 2002)

Linda McKay goes a step further and says that students need to be taught character education everywhere, not jut at school. Character Education must be a community effort. The CHARACTERplus program has established ten principles on which an effective character education should be based:

1. Community Participation
2. Character Education as part of the school district's policy
3. Parents, teachers and community agree on important character traits.
4. Character education is part of all curriculum.
5. Students are given an opportunity to experience character traits.
6. The education is evaluated to make sure the desired effects are being achieved.
7. Students have adult role models.
8. Teachers are given significant resources and time to plan character education into their course curriculum.
9. Students are involved in the planning and implementation of the education program.
10. The character education program is sustained by support from the top.

(McKay, 2002)

Character education is not a new invention in education. Schools were first established in the colonies to teach children how to read the Bible and become good citizens. Educators in the 1930's had a booklet entitled Fifty Hints and Helps in Character Education. The booklet lists thirty one qualities that make a good citizen. Teachers were encouraged to teach three of four qualities a month so all qualities could be taught during the year. The qualities listed include; cleanliness, promptness, cheerfulness, patriotism, courage and thoroughness. Character is defined as "What God and the angels know you are... the sum total of ideas, aspirations, attitudes within the brain, mind and Spirit that crystallize into thought and action." (Clouse, 2001)

Clouse also states that character education began to lose favor in the late 1930's and 1940's when some of the methods were criticized, such as frightening children into being good. Character education also lost favor when studies showed that children were no more honest than those students who did not go through the character education programs.

Character education evolved with society and the focus became one's own mental health. It was no longer in vogue to judge right and wrong. Misbehavior was a sign of emotional health, and not moral health (Clouse, 2001). This thinking led to the development and implementation of Values Clarification.

Values Clarification was developed by Sidney Simon, University of Massachusetts, and Louis Rath, State University of New York. Close to one million Values Clarification books were sold and used, helping students choose their own values, not what others told them they should be. (Clouse, 2001)

There were outcries from many groups, arguing that Values Clarification was too secular and relativistic. The United States Department of Education held a two-day conference in 1987, called Moral Education and Character. Educators were seeking moral programs that allowed student participation, but which was not relativistic. The focus would be on traits and norms accepted by society-at-large. Such traits include not stealing and not murdering, but also taught the legal consequences if one chose to act that way. (Clouse, 2001).

As of the 2002 federal budget, President Bush tripled the funding for character education grants, boosted spending on abstinence programs, and encouraged after school programs to be run by faith-based organizations. (Cardman, 2001).

Clouse says that the new character education programs have three main advantages. First, they allow for student participation. Second, they are not relativistic. And third, they are easy to administer and offer a variety of programs from which to choose. (Clouse, 2001)

One such program is espoused by Sue Minchew (Minchew, 2002). Minchew encourages the use of sports literature to teach character traits, using a constructivist framework. Minchew points out that the book, *The Old Man and the Sea*, teaches perseverance and proactive thinking. Students can learn about work ethic by reading about Lou Gehrig and Jerry Rice. William Faulkner's *The Bear*, is a great book to teach about overcoming fears. The movie, *Rudy*, is a great lesson to overcome ridicule. (Minchew, 2002)

In 1997, the National Council for the Social Sciences (NCSS) formally endorsed character education and said that social science teachers have a responsibility and duty to refocus their classroom on the teaching of character and civic virtues. (Hoge, 2002). Hoge also stresses the importance of a three prong approach, Character Education, Citizenship Education and social studies. There are lessons from the past that have implications for today. For example, studying World War II, students can learn of the internment of Japanese-Americans. Students can see parallels to the holding of Arabs post-9/11. Through this parallel, students can learn topics of due process, minority issues, diversity and tolerance. The three prong approach educates students about history and the rights and duties of citizens, as well as teaches the character traits that are acceptable and desirable.

Character and character education, have been a concern for many years. There have been hundreds of programs developed. There are over one hundred internet web-sites dedicated to character education. Researchers are seeking to establish research-based effective programs. The demand for effective programs mirrors the demand for safe schools. Schools need to be proactive in their approach to harassment, in all of its forms. As we have seen over the past few years, a proactive approach could save lives.

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